Ethics for Behaviorists[1]

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The contemporary field of behavior modification, roughly consisting of the combined technologies of behavior therapy and applied behavior analysis, is now confronting a number of issues which might be described as "ethical." And the way that these issues have been conceptualized and the nature of the suggested directions the field might take in light of them differ depending upon whether the commentors are radical behaviorists or, for lack of a better word, conventional ones. I would like to compare and contrast these two approaches.

To do this requires that one must once again attempt to define "radical behaviorism." Skinner, in 1945, described radical behaviorism rather elliptically as a non-mentalistic approach to the analysis of private events. This definition was presented as an alternative not, as you might suppose, to intentionally mentalistic approaches, but rather to what Skinner called "methodological" behaviorism, which chooses to ignore private events because of the impossibility of obtaining public agreement regarding their occurrence. This latter strategy, primarily derived from philosophic positivism, typified the scientific logic of most behavior theorists of the forties and Skinner wanted to clearly separate his approach from theirs.

Day (1969), Michael (1977), Skinner (1974) and others subsequently presented more complete elaborations or examples of radical behaviorism essentially as the philosophy of operant psychology, a perspective which encompasses the behavior, especially the verbal behavior, of the scientist as an integral part of science. (I should note at this point that an effort to define radical behaviorism itself smacks a little more of methodological than of radical behaviorism, but our conventional modes of speaking practically prevent doing otherwise, at least without a considerable amount of what Skinner calls "translation.")

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I suggest that a radical behaviorist is principally an orthodox Skinnerian, that is, one whose analyses of psychological and cultural phenomena are derived from the writings of B. F. Skinner. I realize that such an orientation may seem narrow and perhaps even cultish to some, but on the other hand, I am continually surprised at the apparent ignorance of many in this field of some of Skinner's most important intellectual contributions. Behavior modifiers who are unfamiliar with, say, Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (which he describes as his most important work) are a little like psychoanalysts who are unacquainted with Freud's interpretation of dreams or physicists who skipped over Einstein's theory of relativity.

Criticisms of Behavior Modification

In any event, in the last few years several legal and ethical issues have arisen as the result of an increasing use of behavioral control techniques as a form of therapy. Legal commentators such as Friedman (1975), Martin (1975), and Wexler (1973) have pointed out cases where behavior modification techniques and implementation strategies may have violated the legal rights of institutional patients. Occasional episodes of apparently flagrant misuse or abuse of behavioral techniques have attracted considerable media attention, such as the Sunland case in Florida (Risley, 1975). At times, the situation in the early seventies appeared to be evolving toward an adversarial relationship, with administrators and behavioral psychologists on one hand, opposing attorneys and civil libertarians on the other. A Senate subcommittee (1974) investigated the extent to which the federal government was funding what it called behavior modification, presumably to ensure that constitutional violations weren't being underwritten with tax dollars, and professional associations began to consider whether they needed special ethical instructions for behavior modifiers (Stolz, 1978).

Such a situation was the result of several factors, some of which were caused by the expanding activities of behavior modifiers, while others were due to other trends entirely. In the latter case, for example, there has been a recent move toward the clearer articulation of the civil rights of institutionalized populations, and

behavior modification as a treatment modality has been criticized to some extent merely because it was a frequent form of therapy implemented by means which were deemed in violation of the resident's civil rights—or, at least, which couldn't be implemented without considerably more consideration of such rights. But the same criticism could and has been applied to other forms of treatment, or non-treatment for that matter, implemented under similar institutional conditions.

At the same time, it is fair to say that behavior modifiers brought more than a little bit of this criticism upon themselves. For more than a decade, some have been essentially "selling" behavior modification both as a cure-all and as a form of treatment so easily learned that anyone can pick it up by reading the right book or attending a workshop. And perhaps for limited purposes they are right. Unfortunately, some of the graduates of those two-day schools of behavior theory are now representing what they do as "behavior modification" and are being identified by the public as "behavior modifiers." In other words, the field itself has contributed to a public and even professional confusion regarding the nature of behavior modification, principally by selling a drastically oversimplified model of that approach for the purposes of encouraging broader utilization. This is not, of course, an entirely unworthy objective, simply one which has now resulted in a large amount of uncertainty and even error regarding who and what represents "behavior modification."

Reactions of Conventional Behaviorists

There have been several responses by the profession to help improve its public and legal image. Although these responses are "conventional" as I used the term earlier, I don't wish to imply that they are either misguided or trivial. In fact, they are usually quite well thought-out. What radical behaviorists have had to say is almost entirely along another dimension except on one issue, and I will address their contributions later.

Basically behavior modifiers have focused their attention on three issues and, significantly, they have tended to discontinue one characteristic form of reaction to criticism which has been a popular one in the field since its inception. That is the "We're scientists, and you don't understand" argument which typified most arguments between behavior modifiers and just about everybody else for many years. Most of today's concern does not center on the empirical validity of behavior modification as an appropriate form of therapy (for that matter, it's rarely been a criterion for any psychological theory) but rather upon the conditions of its implementations.

The three professional moves to place behavior modification in a better light as an acceptable treatment strategy have been, first, to identify those criticisms which are specific to behavior modification, or stated the other way, to distinguish those constitutional and regulatory constraints which apply to all institutional practices from those which apply exclusively to the form of treatment itself. As Stolz (1978) pointed out, behavior modification has often simply attracted criticism which, in fact, is more appropriately directed to the institutional conditions, not the particular treatment modality. In other words, one reaction of the field to our critics has been to become considerably more knowledgeable about the underlying legal issues, some of which have to do with the particular form of behavioral treatment, e.g., the appropriateness of a group token economy, as opposed to those which center on issues of institutional procedures, e.g., obtaining client consent to treatment.

A second form of reaction has been to begin developing an acceptable set of behavioral definitions regarding the nature of behavior modification practice. Perhaps beginning with the work of Sulzer-Azaroff and her colleagues in Connecticut, there has been a significant movement toward the articulation of those behavioral competencies which collectively identify someone as a behavior modifier of a particular level of expertise (Sulzer-Azaroff, Thaws and Thomas, 1975). Once developed, such descriptions can be used for several purposes, including the design of training programs (e.g., Lloyd and Whitehead, 1976), the definition of professional positions (e.g., Thomas, 1979), or as part of a licensing or boarding process such as that which the Association for Behavior Analysis is discussing (Krapfl, 1978).

A third trend has been to consider the development of specific ethical values for behavior modification as a profession. In that regard, one should not consider advice or guidelines for behavior modifiers to behave in accordance with constitutional precepts as any significant step. Rather what is at issue is whether there is something sufficiently unique about behavior modification as to suggest a set of values

somehow distinct or different from those of the other helping professions. In reviewing the most prominent statements along those lines, those of the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy (1976) and of the American Psychological Association's Commission on Behavior Modification (Stolz, 1978), one can conclude that the reaction of the profession so far has been that the values of behavior modifiers are and ought to be simply those of the psychological profession as a whole; a kind of 1960's liberalism, firmly grounded in the right to third party reimbursement.

Ethics and Radical Behaviorism

It is at this point that what the radical behaviorists have to say begins to make a difference, one that perhaps deserves a wider audience. But before beginning to discuss any specific recommendations made by the radical behaviorists on the matter of appropriate goals or values for behavior modification, another matter must be addressed first, and that is the topic of ethics itself. Radical behaviorists claim that ethical issues, whether of religious, scientific, or social significance, are simply matters of *behavior,* subject essentially to the same kind of scientific analysis as are any other behavioral phenomena. In other words, radical behaviorists recognize no division between the worlds of fact and value, at least insofar as general principles of behavior are involved. Obviously what a scientist *knows* about something, such a nuclear fission, and what he *does* with that knowledge, such as build a bomb, are different. But the underlying behavioral variables which account for both the scientist's acquisition of knowledge and his subsequent social utilization thereof are qualitatively the same; that is, the generic processes of reinforcement, stimulus control, and so forth operate in both instances. Behavior is behavior, whether labelled scientific or ethical or unscientific or unethical. This perspective, of course, isn't exactly a new one, at least philosophically speaking. Philosophers such as Jerry Bentham, earlier argued for what amounts essentially to a science of ethics, but Skinner and the radical behaviorists are unique as advocates of the position in, so to speak, knowing what they are talking about.

Like earlier social philosophers, Skinner presented many of his arguments for the scientific analysis and development of moral behavior first within the framework of a utopian novel, *Walden Two* (1948). Of course, few behaviorists consider the picture painted in that book to be conceptually a work of fiction, an impossible dream; certainly Skinner didn't. The behavioral science necessary to create the environmental control responsible for the "value system" of Walden Two is too easy to envision by behavior modifiers. That there are those among us, perhaps even the author himself, who would not choose to live in such a community is recognized as simply a comment upon our own reinforcement histories. The values of the residents of Walden Two are not those of everyone, they weren't intended to be, but the fact that theirs were described as being deliberately engineered as opposed to being established rather haphazardly, as are most of ours, by the confused interaction of all sorts of social influences is the difference between planning and accident, not between fiction and reality.

Thus Skinner, first and perhaps most clearly in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), followed by Day (1977), Vargas (1977), and others have presented the radical behaviorist's perspective of ethics and values as matters of behavior fact and, as such, understandable within the framework of a science of behavior. Skinner has argued that there are essentially three general classes of such values or goals, which form the basis for an analysis of social ethics, and he has conceptualized these values as "reinforcers" to indicate their functional role in the determination of behavior (1971). There are, first, those events or objectives which are directly reinforcing to the individual who seeks them, such as food, comfort, and sex. Second, there are those social outcomes which are important to groups more or less as opposed to individuals, such as conformity to rules, providing protection to others, and so forth. Finally, Skinner has argued for a third set of values which reflect contributions to a culture's survivability. Perhaps his most frequent example of this third class is the very practice of scientific behavior itself.

Some behaviorists are a little uncomfortable with Skinner's "value system," particularly since the linkage between such a system and operant behavior theory is not too clear upon first reading. Obviously, one can quickly connect unconditioned reinforcers to the first set of personal values, the "good" of the individual, but how well does the concept of reinforcement relate to group values, whether immediate or long-range? Naturally, behavior is only shaped by those reinforcers which are personally effective, that is

to say, behavior is only controllable by immediate reinforcers. But when Skinner begins to talk about group values, he is talking about outcomes which lead others to reinforce an individual, to "mediate" reinforcement for someone else. It is behaviorally obvious why *I* should seek reinforcers, food and shelter for example, but why should *you* give them to me? Clearly, only if the effects of my behavior are somehow reinforcing to you.

Thus Skinner is really not distinguishing between two different classes of reinforcers so much as he is clarifying the circumstances which determine their availability. In the one case, that of personal values, the situation in a conceptual sense is socially independent, one's behavior is simply controlled by the available effective reinforcers; Robinson Crusoe without Friday, or more accurately, Adam alone. (Obviously most of Crusoe's survival skills were the result of an earlier education in society; the origin of Adam's behavior is somewhat more controversial and at least a plausible case can be made for shaping by natural consequences.) In the second situation, reinforcement becomes dependent upon the mediation of others, one is reinforced only if someone else is predisposed (or shaped) to do so. Thus, the delivery of reinforcers to the individual depends upon the extent to which that individual's behavior is reinforcing to others. (This interlocking relationship between individual and the group insofar as direct and mediated reinforcement goes, roughly parallels Skinner's earlier analysis of nonverbal and verbal operants, where again the basis of classification is the socially evolved system of reinforcing someone else for their behavior in your behalf, or at least to your benefit.)

Skinner's final set of values based upon the concept of cultural survival really represents more of a parallel with evolutionary theory than any direct derivation from operant theory, but Skinner has often indicated the correlated relationships between "contingencies of selection" and "contingencies of reinforcement" (e.g., Skinner, 1969, Ch. 7). The argument for the value of cultural survival is simply that of the concept of evolution applied to cultural practices—the natural selection of socially determined operants. And, because the selected behaviors are operant, social practices can be deliberately survival oriented. They need not be, of course, and obviously usually aren't; the immediacy of the other two sets of values characteristically override any long range concerns. That dominance leads to one of Skinner's most frequently made points, that the survival of the culture could depend upon our recognition of those behavioral processes which tend to mitigate against our efforts in behalf of the future, somewhat in the same way as wanting to see your golf ball well hit mitigates against hitting a golf ball well—you have to keep your head down instead.

Thus Skinner presents an analysis of cultural values which reflects our knowledge of genetic and environmentally determined behavior. Values are seen as events or objectives which shape our behaviors, and Skinner says that there are three important classes of such values. But the distinctions among them do not depend so much upon there being different *kinds* of reinforcers involved as much as it does upon the social situations in which effective reinforcers are delivered. The first class of personal reinforcers is elemental, the activities of others are not ordinarily at issue. (There is an exception to this when someone else is, in fact, a source of unmediated reinforcement, such as in aggression or rape.) In the second, reinforcement depends upon others and thus one's behavior must be reinforcing to them. Finally, the processes of social evolution suggests a third class of values, activities and outcomes which contribute to a culture's survival, that is, the natural selection of social operants. Regarding this latter class, Skinner has both a concern and a recommendation. The concern is that the dynamics of behavior control resist social practices which have distant rather than immediate effects and thus a survival orientation is difficult to establish within a society. The recommendation is that scientific behaviors, and particularly the science of behavior, are social practices which are or can be especially future directed. He believes a culture will become more viable by its adoption of a more deliberately scientific perspective and that practices which oppose such an outlook will hasten its decline (Skinner, 1953). Broadly speaking, he has cast this argument in the form of behaviorism versus mentalism.

Within such a broad framework, many specific analyses and recommendations can be elaborated and several radical behaviorists, including Skinner, have had something to say about what ought to be the specific "values" of behavior modification.

Skinner has made three points which deserve particular attention. The first, which really has to

do more with the culture than with the profession per se, is simply his strong endorsement of behavior modification as a helping profession (e.g., Skinner, 1978, Ch. 1). This support is principally based upon the behavior modifier's attention to contingencies of reinforcement rather than the mental states as the basis for both analysis and change of behavioral problems. In this regard, Skinner also has been outspoken in his opposition to the current efforts to introduce mentalism to the field in the guise of cognitive behavior modification (Skinner, 1978, Ch. 8). Skinner also has raised two points regarding what behavior modification *ought* to be doing. First, therapeutic behavior change primarily should be accomplished with positive rather than aversive means. Second, meaningful and lasting behavior change is better accomplished without the use of contrived reinforcer systems (e.g., Skinner, 1978, Ch. 1). This is not an appropriate place for a full discussion of Skinner's reasoning for these two suggestions, but they are imbedded in his behavioral interpretation of cultures and if they seem either novel or unreasonable, I strongly recommend that you consult the original sources.

Other radical behaviorists have made recommendations regarding the practice of behavior modification as well, and I would like to briefly describe a few of these as well as present some ideas of my own. Before I do, though, let me reclarify what it is about these suggestions, and Skinner's, that distinguish them from the recommendations for professional self-improvement that have come from those I referred to previously as conventional behaviorists. It is simply that these views are derived from a radical behavioral perspective on society and the role of the behaviorist within it which is not the conventional "two cultures" picture of scientists and society. In a nutshell, conventional (or mtehodological) behaviorists along with most other scientists do not apply their science to themselves or their culture; radical behaviorists deliberately do.

Perhaps one of the better known recommendations for behavior modifiers coming from a radical behaviorist is Goldiamond's encouragement of what he terms the "constructional" approach, the deliberate explication of the contingency relationship between a therapist and a client in a contractual format. This is coupled with recommendations regarding, first, the importance of repertoire development as opposed to elimination and, second, the social clarification of who is the client (Goldiamond, 1974).

Not long ago, Willard Day pointed out that we don't but should, include in our analyses, and recommendations regarding the behavior of others, a description of the variables which are controlling our own behavior while we analyze and recommend. In other words, a contingency analysis is incomplete unless it recognizes the factors controlling the behavior analyst (Day, 1978). And Jack Michael has criticized the emphasis that the psychological professions, including this one, place on personal, as opposed to socio-cultural, "adjustment" (1978). This point also has been a matter of concern for Skinner (e.g., 1978, Ch. 4). As a recent example of radical behaviorism's implications for the value system of behavior modification, the discussion articles in the Spring, 1978 issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* by Holland, Azrin, Birnbrauer and Goldiamond on behavior modification's role in a capitalist society are both intellectually stimulating as well as a clear demonstration that radical behaviorists don't agree on every issue.

Let me conclude with a few observations of my own regarding the values of behavior modification which, I hope, also are "radical" in the sense of reflecting a behaviorally derived concern with the future of the culture. A criticism which has often been voiced regarding Skinner's advocation of a cultural survival ethic has been the apparent difficulty in knowing just exactly which practices are going to contribute to the survival of a society and which are not. And certainly an occasion hesitance about knowing the future "good" of today's activities isn't unreasonable; consider the role of the internal combustion engine in an era of declining oil reserves.

I would like to suggest, though, that behavior modification can deliberately seek to contribute to certain areas of human concern fairly well assured in the knowledge that enhancing the probability of cultural survival will be an automatic consequence. To justify this claim requires a quick review of just how Skinner arrived at cultural survival as a value in the first place, which basically was by drawing a parallel between evolution of social practices and the natural selection of biological characteristics. In both cases, only survival counts (which, by the way, is an observation, not an evaluation).

There is a fundamental difference between the origin of the characteristics which are selected in the two cases. The transmission of adaptive

characteristics in biological evolution is genetic and thus the second generation acquires a given feature simply by virtue of its presence in the genes of the parent generation. The consequence of this process is that genetically determined features which lead to a relatively large number of offspring ultimately come to predominate in the species. Long necked giraffes had more baby giraffes than did shorter necked ones, so the distribution of long necked giraffes was greater in each subsequent generation until they all had long necks.

This, of course, is not the case with the generational transmission of social practices. The kind of behavior we are concerned with in these cases is not biologically handed down from parent to child but depends instead upon other mechanisms. Our children may automatically look like us, but they won't automatically behave as we do unless some processes other than simple procreation take place. Thus, while the mechanism of selection for biological characteristics is predicated upon the genetic transmission of biological features from one generation to the next, the evolution of social practices depends instead upon the existence of certain kinds of social practices which transmit the culture. We breed physiological characteristics into children, but we teach the significant behavioral ones. Regardless of what social practice we are considering for its potential contribution to the culture, unless the next generation learns the same practice, the concern is immaterial.

Behavior analysts can adapt the concept of contributing to cultural survival as a positive value and, without controversy, do so by intentionally addressing themselves to the analysis and improvement of those social mechanisms which transmit the behavioral practices of one generation to the next. This is because in cultural evolution the very system for transmitting social practices is itself a social practice, and thus one which can be improved or worsened by the operation of certain known behavioral factors. Behavior modifiers should deliberately address the problem of analyzing and enhancing those behaviors which transmit the culture, for without such practices, cultural evolution doesn't occur—each generation would have to discover for itself the knowledge and skills of the preceding one.

This perspective implies a behavioral rationale for an interest in child care and education. Since our field already is involved in these areas perhaps little more needs to be said other than to continue to encourage such involvement. There is perhaps one slight shift in orientation worth briefly considering, though, which is simply to re-emphasize the expressions of concern of Skinner, Goldiamond, and others for the relevance of repertoire construction, which usually implies positive reinforcement. An evolutionary perspective on the selection of behavioral practices certainly suggests the importance of behavioral practices upon which cultural selection can operate. That is to say, for behaviors to be selected, many and varied behaviors need to be present. Those practices which transmit the culture are almost by definition practices which build behaviors, not eliminate them. Briefly, we should be interested, if not more interested, in improving ways to develop behaviors as we are in discovering ways to get rid of them.

There is another area of importance regarding the survival of social practices which really hasn't received the attention by behavior analysts that it perhaps warrants, and that is the area of positive health practices. We not only can work toward the survival of the culture by helping to assure that one generation quickly and easily acquires the practices of the former, but also toward the objective of assuring the longevity of those practices by assuring the longevity of those who practice them. And this perspective on the survival of cultural practices through the survival of practitioners applies to the current generation as well as the next. A person obviously can contribute to the future by transmitting his or her skills to the succeeding generation, but one also can contribute to the future by living long and well enough to be a meaningful part of it. Behavior modifiers today have begun to address some of the problems which are relevant to health and longevity, such as drug and alcohol abuse, obesity, smoking and so on, and my point is merely to encourage a further interest among all of us in such problems.

Behavior modifiers should, however, examine their current practices in order to assure that they are not working in the opposite direction. In the last several years, it has been a relatively common practice among behavior modifiers to implement token economies in institutional settings and to include food items as part of the back-up reinforcer system. Recently, courts have mandated the exclusion of basic nutritional requirements from functioning as part of institutional behavioral management systems, so the food items in some

token economies have shifted toward desserts and junk food. Tobacco products are also often included. A program with which I am familiar with represents the sort of thing I believe we all should try to avoid. In an institutional setting for juveniles in Des Moines, Iowa, a token economy system relates a variety of academic and social behaviors to a number of back-up items including play activities, toys, and bedtime snacks, including soft drinks and candy. One of the behaviors which earns the residents points in this institution is finishing all the food on their plates, a contingency which was implemented to eliminate waste. A recent review of the nutritional habits of the residents, conducted by one of our graduate students as a sort of pre-thesis activity, revealed that a significant number of the youngsters were overweight, that they were rapidly gaining weight in the institution, and they were being reinforced with junk food which both supported the overeating and contributed to it. Unfortunately, I doubt that this situation is a unique one.

Behavior modifiers who manipulate food to control behavior should consider the possible health effects of such programs as well as the behavioral ones. Shaping institutional table manners at the potential cost of tooth decay, obesity, and heart disease seems a little shortsighted. A more rational program, considering both immediate and long term behavioral and physiological outcomes, would teach the residents to select their own meals by reinforcing their choices of nutritionally-balanced and appropriately-sized portions. An exercise program would seem to be called for, as well. Junk foods, heavily sugared drinks, and cigarettes simply should not be used as reinforcers unless the client's health is an irrevelant factor, such as with terminally ill patients. In other circumstances, such reinforcers can cause more than long term health problems than would be counterbalanced by their immediate behavioral effects. Behavior modifiers can make great contributions to positive health practices, and are beginning to do so, but we had better make sure our own back porches are clean in this regard before we go out once again offering our sweeping skills to others.

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